

Comment by Daniel Ellsberg on Michael Lerner's Middle East proposals in Tikkun (to be published during November)
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Tie him to the mast, it's too late to put wax in his ears; Michael Lerner has succumbed to the siren songs of General Dugan's Air Force briefers, with their "surgical" solution to Iraq's offensive capabilities.

As in the past, the essence of the Air Force refrain--the very part that has captivated Lerner--has been that if the President just turns the Air Force loose, the rival Services-- Army, Navy and Marines--can all stay home safely with their families and enjoy the war vicariously by watching dramatic reconstructions: Tom Cruise in Top Gun, not as Ron Kovic.

The argument for preventive war against Iraq--which is what Lerner is endorsing here, as part of a larger Middle East policy--is about as persuasive in the present circumstances as that argument ever gets: and it has, evidently, persuaded a lot of people besides Lerner, including high officials throughout the Middle East, Henry Kissinger and William Safire, and according to a number of journalists, many of the highest officials in the Bush Administration.

For that reason, a US-initiated offensive against the full range of Iraqi command structures and military capabilities has been, without the need for urging from Tikkun, a lively option from the outset of the US buildup of offensive forces in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. It is, in fact, the one to bet on after the buildup is complete sometime soon, unless Saddam back down: if growing numbers of Americans, Congressional leaders, and influential foreign states do not begin to oppose it vigorously. a currently implied ultimatum.

Of course, given the limits of UN-endorsed objectives, Saddam could shortcircuit the US attack by withdrawing from Kuwait and releasing all hostages, keeping his military forces intact. Administration sources show their real priorities -- indistinguishable from Lerner's--by describing this possibility to journalists as "the nightmare scenario."

Saddam would be wise to back down in this fashion, before international forces strike him. He may yet do so, with or without face-saving concessions from the Arab states. But, obviously, he may not. By the same token, he would probably not be wise enough to accept Lerner's hypothetical ultimatum, which demands his radical disarmament while offering a Palestinian state. What then?

Should we encourage the Administration to carry out its present almost-official threats of offensive action "if necessary"? (This is the effective impact, I believe, to be expected from

Lerner's contribution). Or should we--as I believe--do all we can to discourage the US Government from starting a war against Iraq?

What will happen in the Middle East, if it comes to war, is not the Utopian Air Force dream of General Dugan, now shared and endorsed by Tikkun. The Air Force strategy will be only part of the war, the fun part: except that even it won't work as fast or as fully or as antiseptically as the briefers have promised. There will be more blood in US cockpits and a lot more blood on the ground, civilians' and childrens', not only in Iraq but in Israel and Egypt and Saudi Arabia. It is striking that Lerner, like most proponents of preventive war, fails to provide any estimate whatever of this "butcher's bill".

And there will be a ground war too. Whatever the Air Force and Tikkun recommends, the other Chiefs will not be satisfied to let the Army and Marines "sit idly by with folded hands" while the Air Force and carrier planes go for the gold. Nor will the Commander in Chief let Iraqi armed forces that survive air attacks--remnants that could be quite sizeable, and tenacious--continue to hold on to Kuwait and to surviving American hostages. He will send the heavy tank divisions already deployed to Saudi Arabia to carry out what they have been told is their main mission: the liberation of Kuwait, or what the bombers have left of it.

The President probably shares Lerner's reluctance to see a ground invasion of Iraq itself. But he may or may not be able to abide for long the continued hostility, the threats to hostages and the appeals to Holy War and terrorism by Saddam's successors in Baghdad. If, as is not unlikely, he finally decides to send the tanks and ground troops into Iraq to oust them, then the replay of the Six-Day War (extended by some weeks) will be followed by endless reruns of Vietnam.

"Low-intensity warfare" could then be a long-term prospect for us not only in Iraq but throughout the Arab and Islamic world (perhaps as far away as Indonesia). The US would be helping authoritarian regimes--newly tainted by their association with this US/Israeli attack on an Arab and Muslim country--repress uprisings of infuriated masses.

The last two prospects, to be sure, are just possibilities. There are more: Saddam's threats to destroy oil-fields in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, for one, with possibly prolonged and devastating effects on the world economy if he turns out to be able to do so. Threats of possible preemptive attack; of large chemical warheads; of global terrorism.

Perhaps all these threats are bluffs, or simply exaggerated in their impact, as some advocates of offensive attack claim. Who really knows? Serious consideration of preventive war demands at least some effort to address these ominous uncertainties--as Lerner

fails to do. But in the end, after the best calculations, an American-initiated offensive would be a grand experiment, a roll of the iron dice.

In view of these risks, the case against preventive war--addressed so inadequately in Lerner's discussion--seems to me overwhelming.

How then are we to deal with the real long-run threats presented by the military capabilities, the ruthlessness and ambition, the chemical and the future potential nuclear capability possessed and demonstrated by Iraq's leader (and not only by Iraq's)?

Here are elements of a program addressed both to immediate and to long-run needs:

1. Continue the UN embargo and blockade of Iraq--a "porous" blockade that does not exclude essential food and medicine--as long as necessary to force Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait, meanwhile denying Iraq any rewards from its aggression and inflicting a very heavy, ongoing price in revenue and imports for its continuation.

2. Reverse the buildup of US forces in Saudi Arabia; remove immediately those units not needed for defensive operations, then replace the US component as fully and rapidly as possible with regional Arab and other allied forces. Thus, eliminate the hairtrigger posture that now may tempt either side to preempt, and reduce the financial and political burden of the continuing US involvement so that the embargo has time to work.

3. As the Soviets have proposed: put the multilateral defensive forces in Saudi Arabia and the blockade forces under UN Command, under the authority of the Military Staff Committee of the UN Security Council.

4. As Mitterand proposed at the UN, September 24: as soon as Iraq has withdrawn from Kuwait and released hostages (perhaps encouraged by the following prospect) move urgently to the resolution of the Palestinian and Lebanese conflicts in an international conference, followed by a process of mutually agreed regional arms reduction.

5. As Shevardnadze proposed in an impassioned UN appeal on September 25, bring to the top of the international agenda right now the following measures: the tightening and expansion of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, including "as a matter of utmost urgency" an immediate end to nuclear tests; the elimination of chemical weapons; the control of conventional arms sales; and the building up of a permanent "rapid response" UN peacekeeping force.

The first three points include a peacekeeping force in the Gulf involving several nuclear powers, and thereby buy safety from further aggression by Iraq and others in the region for as long as needed: while the comprehensive diplomatic efforts get underway in pursuit of more fundamental bases for common security.

Progress in these various negotiations is hardly guaranteed; yet with the ending of the Cold War plus the sense of alarm and the spirit of international unity aroused by this crisis, the chances look better than they ever have before. And they look a lot better, overall, than the chances of avoiding catastrophe in a preventive war, or series of wars.

Indeed, if progress is not sought and achieved along all these various lines, then even the most successful preventive attack will not buy the long-term security in the region which is precisely its goal. Unless permanently occupied, a hostile and vengeful Iraq, once violently disarmed, would use its oil wealth to rebuild its offensive capability as soon as possible, and to buy or develop nuclear weapons. This would challenge the Air Force to repeat its "surgery" every decade, like mowing the lawn. And other states would need the same treatment.

That prospect ought to concentrate our minds wonderfully on the pursuit of alternatives. As Shevardnadze said, referring to nuclear nonproliferation but applying to all these challenges: "It is time to trigger off the emergency systems in order to save the situation." If it took Saddam Hussein, and General Dugan, to set off these global alarms, we may yet thank them both.